

Daily Eagle

ROASTED INDIANS.

CREMATION AS PRACTICED BY THE THLINKETS OF ALASKA.

Providing the spirit with a square meal. A Corpse Awaiting Burial—Weird Scene at the Funeral—How the Cremation is Conducted.

Among those Indians known as the Thlinkets, who inhabit the coast and contiguous islands of southeastern Alaska, the practice of cremation is universal, except in the case of shamans or medicine men, whose spirits after death inhabit a higher world apart from the common herd, and slaves who are considered scarcely worthy of this distinction.

The Thlinket believes that shortly before death the spirit of a loved friend goes before will appear to him, saying: "My dear brother, or good friend, you can last but a few suns longer, and it is best so, for life is but hard; so be ready, for I will soon come to lead your spirit to a land where all is happiness."

With the last breath tidings go out to the clan, who assemble with blackened faces to mourn the dead, and in former years the nearer relatives cut off the hair. The corpse is now dressed in the most valued garments, the face decorated in red and black, and placed in a sitting position, with back to the wall, opposite the entrance. All the property of the deceased is now brought and piled on either hand—the Thlinket counts his wealth in blankets, kept stored away in camouflaged wood or cedar chests. Masks, rattles, robes, guns, hunting and fishing implements and dancing paraphernalia are placed directly around; the head is surrounded by a grotesquely carved wooden mask in totemic design, brilliant in its inlaying of tortoiseshell and topped by a semi-transparent forest of sea lion whiskers, while over the body is thrown a highly ornamental blanket, woven from the finer fleece of the mountain goat and worked in black, white, yellow and blue from old patterns, legends that have been handed down through generations until the designs have become conventional.

For three days the dead remains a silent spectator of household affairs, which have to go on much as usual, as a number of families live under the same roof. Visitors come and go, food is prepared at the common central fire, and children toddle about, tumbling over the sleeping dogs; but a general air of quiet prevails until midnight, when the tribe assemble with drum, rattle and dancing sticks, and to their measured accompaniment keep time in monotonous chant, eulogizing and lamenting the dead.

The scene is weird to a degree, the many colored blankets, the blackened faces, the walls hung with arms and fishing implements, the curiously carved and colored house posts; while festoons of dried fish and meat depend from the roof, and all seen through the fitful flashes of the great crackling fire of cedar logs, over which at intervals oil is dashed to redouble the effect.

For three nights this scene is repeated, but on the third day the wealth of the deceased is distributed among the relatives, each one receiving a certain portion, as judged by popular consent.

The funeral pile is now erected directly in rear of the house or on the outskirts of the village, in proximity to the shore. Logs of the fragrant yellow cedar are now brought and laid upon each other, forming a hollow parallelogram seven feet long by three wide. At a height of from two to three feet a flooring of logs is laid, leaving air spaces between them, above which the walls are continued for another foot. Beneath the flooring and around the sides kindling and spruce knots, saturated with gun, are placed.

All being in readiness, on this, the fourth day, the class assemble, a plank is removed from the side or end of the house, and through this opening the dead is carried on a mat made from the inner bark of the red cedar, for it is a strongly rooted superstition among these people that should the body pass through the doorway, that later the death spirit would return to claim more victims. As the body is carried out, an old woman takes some coals and burning fragments from the fire and scatters them after it, to drive away the spirit of death and cleanse the passageway; and afterward throws out a dog to accompany its master's spirit to the world beyond.

The procession now makes its way slowly toward the place selected for cremation, and when reached the body is deposited on the raised flooring of the pile and a torch applied to the resinous splinters readily igniting the whole mass. The women in full dancing attire, consisting of a blue black blanket faced with red cloth and ornamented with hundreds of mother of pearl buttons, fancy colored caps or headresses of raven or eagle feathers, immense earrings and nose pendents, dance blackened and cowering in the right hand a long pole, the end decorated with sprigs of evergreen and bright streamers, form in a half circle about the head of the pile. The men, with dancing sticks and rattles, are grouped on one side, the nearer relatives at about ten paces, hummously humming and wailing. The older men lead the chant or dirge, which is joined in by all, and to its slow notes the women keep time with the body swaying from side to side and bowing in unison, reminding one of the famous sword dance of the Bedonkots.

Often times the arms and personal belongings of the deceased are thrown on the fire, which, by means of long poles, is constantly stirred, and the chant continues until the body is reduced to ashes and the logs consumed. The family collect any remains of bones and the supposed ashes, which are carefully deposited in small decorated boxes or trunks covered with cedar matting, corded with spruce roots, and finally placed in dead houses or family vaults directly in rear of the houses.

Every one now returns to the house, where a grand feast is prepared, consisting of dried salmon dipped in seal oil, berries, spawning potatoes, roots, berries, edible sea weed, shell fish, seal meat and blubber from the fat of the wild cat of the mountain. Food and grease are placed in carved platters and consigned to the flames, to sustain the deceased spirit on its weary journey. With the coming of night the most assembly, setting themselves around the fire, when the women in full dancing costume file in, forming in continuous rank around the walls, facing the audience of males, and repeat the swaying, bowing dance previously enacted at the cremation, keeping time to the chant. This closes the funeral ceremonies, which have now lasted through four days. The dead may be honored again in future years by a period of dancing and feasting, and the rebuilding of a deadhouse is always a season of ceremonial celebration.—F. F. Emmons in San Francisco Chronicle.

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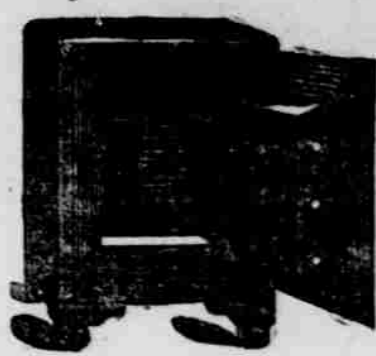
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